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CIA Subcommittee

Senate Logic

The way the Senate runs its internal affairs no doubt would make an efficiency expert squirm. The arbitrary rules, the slow-motion pace, and the seniority system are all a way of life there. Probably President Kennedy had his old alma mater in mind when he said Washington is a place of southern efficiency and northern charm.

But on its own terms, the Senate does manage to operate with a kind of hidden logic. There is no other word for the way in which that august body recently solved the problem of two prima donnas, Chairman Fulbright of the Foreign Relations Committee and Chairman Russell of the Armed Forces Committee, regarding the CIA.

Last year the two collided on the issue of why Foreign Relations members were barred from CIA briefings of other lawmakers. In the Russell view, such an invasion represented muscling in on his own "watchdog" panel, which conducts the briefings. Senator Fulbright felt the CIA's activities touched on foreign policy often enough to warrant admitting at least some of his committee.

When brought out into an open floor fight, Senator Fulbright lost. The Senate by a 61-to-28 vote defeated a proposal to let his panel members in. But the most interesting postscript is that, in a gesture of courtliness, Chairman Russell the other day invited three Foreign Relations members including Senator Fulbright to sit in on such a briefing as guests. He apparently intends to keep on doing so in the future.

Senator Fulbright has won his request. Senator Russell has been confirmed as master in his own house. And senatorial protocol has triumphed.

All of which reminds us of a baseball umpire who, when asked whether the last pitch was a ball or a strike, replied with dignity, "Brother, until I call it, it ain't nothin'."

One of the great problems of the Foreign Relations Committee in the past, bearing on the current dispute, was the garrulousness of its members. CIA matters must obviously be kept confidential. We trust that the new "guests" will respect their privilege and avoid the leaks that have characterized their own panel's executive sessions.